



For the Success of Each Learner

Educational Leadership

April 2007 | Volume **64** | Number **7**

The Prepared Graduate Pages 80-82

A (Pod)cast of Thousands

Ann Marie Dlott

Creating podcasts inspires elementary students—and prepares them to speak through digital media.



I received this e-mail from a parent on Mother's Day:

Margaret turned 10 today and with great pride chose to share with her family, grandparents, cousins, and sisters her podcast. It was emotional for my husband and me to hear, too. Margaret has always struggled with her speech, but the clarity, inflection, and confidence in her voice shone brightly on her face today. Margaret made it clear to us that you took her hand and, step by step, the podcast developed. You gave Margaret the opportunity to succeed, and she did, and for that we thank you.

April 2007

This message reaffirmed my belief that teachers make a difference in children's lives. As I logged on to the blog where Margaret's podcast was published, I read comments from 18 other people, many of them classmates proud of her achievements. I had discovered motivational learning tools that could involve the whole school community: podcasting and blogging.

Podcasts: The What and Why

If we want our students to be confident, effective communicators in the coming decades, we must prepare them to communicate through digital media. Young adults increasingly not only read online but also test out their writing voices online. Jobs may soon require employees to be comfortable researching and presenting information to an unlimited audience through the Web. And for students like Margaret, digital technologies can open new doors to confidence and communication.

As the instructional integration specialist for Shrewsbury Public Schools in Massachusetts, I was fairly new to the terms *podcast* and *blog* but intrigued about how teachers might use these tools to enhance student learning.

A podcast is a digital broadcast that anyone can produce using a computer, a microphone, and audio editing software, such as GarageBand (for a Macintosh computer) or Audacity (for a PC). The broadcast can be downloaded and accessed through any MP3 player. A blog is a Web site about some topic or issue; visitors to the site can share comments on that topic.

Because I liked the idea of having a learning community write comments in response to students' podcasts, I decided to have students post their podcasts on a blog. I set the wheels in motion for three projects through which elementary classes would make podcasts linked to

thematic units. I knew that—as with any project—the most important part of making podcasts would be the process. I believed that creating podcasts would motivate students to learn content, and viewing these creations on a blog would motivate them to write comments to their peers. Skills they would need as 21st-century writers would emerge. What I didn't realize was how powerfully revising scripts for broadcasting would improve students' writing.

Promote the Midwest, Young Man

My first podcast project, with Ruth Cook's 4th grade class at Spring Street School, involved U.S. geography. To introduce the unit, Ruth and I scripted our own podcast. If we expected our students to create a podcast, we had to experience making one ourselves. We met one day after school to record our scripts. We spent considerable time rerecording and laughing as we fumbled over our words. But we were proud of our final project and couldn't wait to post it on the class blog.

Ruth and I introduced the unit to her students, explained what a podcast was, and showed students the blog where our podcast was posted. Students asked whether their grandparents living in another state would be able to listen to their podcasts. They were impressed to learn that their voices would be on the Web for all to hear.

We invited students' parents to listen to our unit introduction podcast with their children and submit comments. And comment they did! The messages we received conveyed the excitement felt by both students and parents. One parent wrote, "I can't wait to hear what the kids are going to teach us. I'll be waiting!"

The class began the unit by researching Lewis and Clark. I set up a Web page containing links to resources about these explorers' accomplishments. We also assigned each learner a podcast to listen to from the Web site <http://lewisandclarktrail.com/elearning.htm>. Using the strategy of a think aloud, I demonstrated the skills students would need to listen successfully to a podcast: how to rewind, replay, and pause to take notes.

Ruth and I chose a small group of students to develop a question-and-answer podcast about Lewis and Clark. The students were eager to share the experience with their classmates. We posted that podcast on our class blog and asked the rest of the class to listen to it and submit comments. Students couldn't wait to start researching and scripting their own podcasts.

Mrs. Cook assigned each student a state in the Midwest or West to research. She painted this scenario:

The President of the United States will be visiting the Midwest/West to announce which state will be the recipient of his latest award, "Best Midwestern/Western State to Live in or Visit." To help him decide, he will be downloading and listening to each of your podcasts about a state. Create a podcast that will convince the President to select your state. Your podcast should include descriptive and persuasive language that creates a wonderful image of your state.

Each student created her or his own podcast featuring music and sound effects. We posted each one on our blog (<http://spsmidweststates.blogspot.com>). We gave students a rubric showing how their work was to be critiqued. Rather than write a report listing the physical features of their state, they had to sell these features through descriptive language. Our reading specialist, Lucy Lubke, worked with students on how to use descriptive language, how to hook an audience with a good lead sentence, and how to close with alluring wording so the reader would be left with a desire to visit. Students practiced delivering their remarks with expression.

Brendan was generally hard to motivate as a writer. But he eagerly chose to write about

Colorado for his podcast because he had gone there to visit his grandfather. Brendan revised his script several times; his final product and his delivery were wonderful. Brendan's grandfather sent him this comment:

Your podcast made me want to get on a plane right now! It's more fun to talk about a place when you have been there and know the inside story, isn't it? Where shall we go next?

Margaret was thrilled when she logged on to the classroom blog and read what her former 3rd grade teacher, Mrs. Ogren (who had moved out of state), had to say about her podcast:

You did a super job! You made Indiana sound like a great place to visit. This project must have been lots of fun to do. Keep up the good work.

A Digital Tour of the Town

The 3rd grade curriculum for Massachusetts requires that students learn about the history of their town. In the past, Shrewsbury students would tour historic landmarks of the town and write reports about them. Mary Lou Ganas of Spring Street School and I decided that, instead, we would ask students to do digital reporting. Students created a podcast of an audio walking tour of historic Shrewsbury Center that we posted on the class blog.

I presented examples of city audio tours from two Web sites: <http://audisseyguides.com> and www.boston.com/travel/boston/freedomtrail/podcast. We assigned each small group a historic landmark within Shrewsbury, such as a one-room schoolhouse dating from 1830. Our curriculum specialist, Marcia Smith, and I provided information on local history and landmarks to prime their research. As a class, we created a walking map of the center of town, including a key to the location of each stop on the tour.

Students in each group developed questions about their landmark and then set out to find the answers and craft a script. Students had to describe the location's physical features and talk about its history. They also had to write a transition sentence to carry the listener from their landmark to the next location on the tour.

Two students wrote additional stories based on Shrewsbury lore. Tim wrote a script for a podcast describing what the common in the center of town might have looked like in the 1700s. Aaron wrote a script for a podcast about Dr. Brigham, a town doctor who practiced in the 19th century.

People from town also created podcasts to further enhance the audio tour. Beverly Fisher, a lifelong Shrewsbury resident, spoke about what it was like to attend an old school that now houses the historical society. Bill Glascock, third owner of the historic Sumner House, described the house and the people who had visited there. And history teacher James Smith recorded in the role of Artemas Ward, a resident of colonial Shrewsbury who was the first commander in chief of the Continental Army.

Students and their parents can now download the podcast to their MP3 players and take the walking tour themselves. The podcasts and information about historic landmarks in Shrewsbury are available at www.shrewsbury-ma.gov/schools/Spring/ShrewsburyHistory/HistoryofShrewsbury.html. The URL for the audio walking tour is <http://spsaudiotours.blogspot.com>.

A Creative Collaboration

Our final project was a collaboration between two elementary schools in the district. Each student in Rachel Correia's 4th grade class at Spring Street School created a podcast of a poem

he or she had written. Each student from Joan Beall's 3rd grade class at Floral Street School listened to one of the poems and drew a picture to go along with it. The poem and illustration were combined and posted as a visual podcast at <http://spspoetryproject.blogspot.com/>. Students were excited by this collaboration, and authors waited with great anticipation to see what their partners' illustrations would look like.

Well Worth the Effort

As the teachers and I wrapped up these projects, we asked ourselves whether the time spent redesigning these units and learning how to effectively use the technology was worth the effort. The answer was an emphatic yes. The excitement of creating a polished product for the Web and the possibility of reaching a diverse and real audience were tremendous motivators. When students were immersed in writing for a global audience, their writing improved. Listening skills also improved because they were required to be specific in their public, written comments to peers. Students worked tirelessly to publish their best work.

Every student was proud of his or her final podcast and would enthusiastically ask when it would be posted so he or she could share it. One of the most rewarding outcomes was the response from parents and family. Students were proud when distant family members wrote to them.

We as teachers must do all we can to prepare students to achieve to their highest potential. Introducing the tools of the 21st century is an essential part of that preparation. Podcasting in education is still evolving. Don't be afraid to experiment with all it has to offer.

Ann Marie Dlott is now Technology Integration Specialist for Hopkinton Public Schools in Hopkinton, Massachusetts; 774-232-1241; adlott@hopkinton.k12.ma.us.

Copyright © 2007 by Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

© Copyright ASCD. All rights reserved.